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C.I.A. Chief Sees Soviet Buildup

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WASHINGTON, March 20—Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of Central Intelligence, said today he believed that the Soviet Union was seeking military superiority over the United States to gain political leverage and to compensate for shortcomings at home.

"I believe the Soviets think in 19th-century terms," he said. "I think they are trying to compensate for their weaknesses—economic, ideological and political, by building a military force that they hope will weigh in the balance."

He added: "They hope that this power of military forces can be translated into political opportunity, to political leverage on the rest of the world and therefore that they can, without necessarily going to war, gain an overall political advantage."

Admiral Turner, who left his post as commander of Atlantic alliance forces in the Mediterranean to take over at the Central Intelligence Agency 10 days ago, made the remarks on the CBS television program "Face the Nation."

Asked for his estimate of Soviet military strength—a subject of intense debate among United States policymakers—Admiral Turner said: "I think that the military balance is gradually eroding to the Soviet side."

However, he added that the United States "can and will redress that again because I think the people of the United States are perceiving this need."

On another issue, he said that he regarded previous covert payments to foreign leaders as a "very common and very legitimate tool of foreign policy" that had constituted an "infinitesimal part" of the hundreds of billions in foreign assistance extended by the United States over the last 20 years. "It does not involve things that are not proper," he said.

He acknowledged, however, that "a few" projected covert operations had been called off recently either because they were judged to be too risky or because it was felt that the operations could just as well be conducted openly.

In reply to another question, he asserted that no American reporters were on the payroll of the C.I.A., and said that he would see to it that there would be none in the future.

Admiral Turner also said that the C.I.A. "has a good idea" of what is going on in Zaire, parts of which have been invaded by Katangan forces operating from neighboring Angola. He declined to elaborate, however.

Asked about the assassination Friday of President Marien Ngouabi of Congo, he said it was "a typical internal problem."